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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#) [NATIONAL](#) [ASSEMBLY](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: OPPOSITION GROUPS IN PARLIAMENT
FORM 34-MEMBER REFORM BLOC

REF: A. KUWAIT 3826
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 3432

Classified By: CDA Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary: The three opposition groups in Parliament -- the Islamic Bloc (17 MPs), the Popular Action Bloc (9 MPs), and the National Action Bloc (8 MPs) -- announced the formation of a new, 34-member Reform Bloc, culminating weeks of meetings between the groups. They also agreed on a common agenda, focusing primarily on fighting corruption, and a timetable for discussing the issues in Parliament. The Government met with the three blocs separately to discuss their priorities and outline its own four-year strategy. Members of the Islamic Bloc told Poloff they were optimistic about the formation of and cooperation between the blocs, which they saw as "a positive development for democracy in Kuwait." Members of the more liberal National Action Bloc were more pessimistic, noting that the three blocs had different outlooks and priorities. They predicted the groups would clash after passing only one or two items on the agenda.

[1](#)2. (C/NF) Comment: While parliamentary blocs are not new, the blocs in this Parliament have exhibited an unprecedented level of cohesion and coordination. As one MP suggested, this is likely driven in part by recent electoral reforms, which, by more than doubling the number of voters in each district, are forcing parliamentarians to define themselves as part of a bloc in order to cater to a much larger electorate. The Government has also adopted a different approach, encouraging the blocs' formation and working with them rather than seeking to undermine them, as many accuse former Ministers Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd and Mohammed Sharar of doing. Although the creation of an umbrella Reform Bloc is a positive development, there are still significant differences between the three blocs at its core, which seem to agree on little else besides fighting corruption. It remains to be seen whether these ideologically-opposed groups will be able to cooperate on a joint agenda in the next parliamentary session, which begins October 30. End summary and comment.

Opposition Groups Form Reform Bloc

[1](#)3. (C/NF) After weeks of meetings, Parliament's three opposition blocs (ref A) announced October 10 the formation of a new Reform Bloc, comprising 34 out of Parliament's 65 members. (Note: Members of the 16-member Cabinet serve ex officio as MPs. End note.) While ideologically opposed on many social and religious issues, the Islamic Bloc (17 MPs), the Popular Action Bloc (9 MPs), and the National Action Bloc (8 MPs) nonetheless agreed to cooperate to fight corruption and push for several specific political and economic reforms. They also agreed on a timetable for raising the issues in

Parliament (see para 8). Several Cabinet Ministers met separately on October 12 and 13 with the three blocs to discuss their priorities and to lay out the Government's own four-year development strategy (ref B). Commenting on the meetings, State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Dr. Ismail Al-Shatti said the Government and Parliament agreed on the need to fight corruption, increase transparency, and implement a clear development strategy. "Everyone wants to achieve (these) important goals. All MPs we met are asking for that," he said. Public reaction to the formation of the Reform Bloc and the Government's meetings with the three blocs' meetings has been generally positive.

Islamist MPs Upbeat about Reform Bloc

¶4. (C/NF) Dr. Nasser Al-Sane, a member of the Islamic Bloc, downplayed differences between the three blocs during an October 11 meeting with Poloff, saying the blocs had "very easily" agreed on a common agenda. Issues they disagreed on, like taxation of Kuwaiti agents of foreign companies, which liberals opposed and Islamists supported, were simply left off the agenda. Al-Sane, who is also a member of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, said members of the liberal National Action Bloc were "not happy" about Islamists' insistence on the zakat law being included on the agenda, but had nonetheless agreed to support it to preserve a united front. He noted that the Government had insisted on meeting the blocs separately rather than as a group. Al-Sane said the typically contentious elections to Parliament's standing and ad hoc committees, which will take place when the Assembly reconvenes October 30 and which the blocs are trying to coordinate on, would indicate the level of cooperation

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between the blocs and their ability to cooperate on a joint agenda. He suggested the Islamic Bloc and the Popular Action Bloc were more closely aligned than the National Action Bloc, but noted that the formation of relatively cohesive parliamentary blocs and the level of coordination between them was unprecedented in Kuwait's political history.

¶5. (C/NF) During an October 17 meeting, another member of the Islamic Bloc, Adel Al-Sarawi, attributed the formation of and unprecedented cooperation between the blocs to Parliament's passage of legislation reducing the number of electoral constituencies from 25 to 5 in July. He explained that MPs were trying to redefine themselves to appeal to a significantly larger constituency and noted that several former "service deputies" -- MPs whose political support derived from obtaining favors for their constituents -- had joined one of the three opposition blocs in the new Parliament. "You can no longer achieve anything in Parliament by working on your own," he argued. "This is a positive development for democracy in Kuwait." Al-Sarawi said the "number one" priority of the Reform Bloc was fighting corruption and agreed with Al-Sane that it had been relatively easy for the blocs to agree on a common agenda in part because their constituents expected it.

Liberals a Little More Skeptical

¶6. (C/NF) MP Faisal Al-Shaye, a member of the National Action Bloc and a prominent liberal, was less optimistic, predicting the blocs would "clash" after passing only one or two items on their agenda. "We have different outlooks and different priorities," he said, noting that the National Action Bloc's top priority was privatization, which the Islamic Bloc was split over and the Popular Action Bloc completely opposed. The top priority of the Islamic Bloc, on the hand, was the zakat law, which Al-Shaye said "we don't care about at all." He said the list of the Reform Bloc's priorities was a product of the three blocs' earlier meetings and included many MPs' or blocs' pet projects, which the rest

of the Reform Bloc did not fully support. Although he was pessimistic about cooperation on issues beyond fighting corruption, he acknowledged that cooperation between the blocs was ultimately a positive development. As a brief aside, he said that although Al-Sarawi was a member of the Islamic Bloc, he was closer to the National Action Bloc on many issues, a comment that highlights the often ambiguous leanings of Kuwaiti parliamentarians.

¶7. (C/NF) The Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Mohammed Jassem Al-Sager, echoed Al-Shaye's sentiments in an October 15 meeting with PolChief. Al-Sager, who is also a member of the National Action Bloc, said each bloc had its own priorities and predicted they would ultimately fail to cooperate on a common agenda. He noted that the National Action Bloc opposed writing off citizens' loans and the zakat law, the top priorities of the Popular Action Bloc and the Islamic Bloc, respectively. He said that even within the National Action Bloc not everyone had the same priorities. "Whatever the Government brings, whether we like it or not, we have to deal with as a priority," he concluded.

Priorities of the Reform Bloc

¶8. (C/NF) Begin text of the priorities of the Reform Bloc in order of importance (Note: Dates in parentheses are the session(s) the bloc intends to discuss the issue in Parliament. End note.):

- 1) Laws safeguarding state properties (December 4-5, 2006)
- 2) Laws on border warehouses and crossings (November 20-21, 2006)
- 3) Law establishing a third telecommunications company (December 18-19, 2006)
- 4) Anti-monopolization law (December 18-19, 2006)
- 5) Zakat Law (November 6-7, 2006)
- 6) Jaber (the late Amir) Fund (February 19-20, 2007)
- 7) Contracts exceeding 100,000 KD (\$345,000) (February 19-20, 2007)
- 8) Internal Rules and Procedures (January 22-23, 2007)
- 9) Elections Law (January 22-23, 2007)
- 10) Sports (January 8, 2007)
- 11) Social rights for women and children (January 8, 2007)
- 12) Stipends for students (January 8, 2007)
- 13) Jaber Islamic Bank (March 5-6, 2007)
- 14) Health Company (March 5-6, 2007)
- 15) Disclosure of financial assets (March 19-20, 2007)
- 16) Handicapped retirement (March 19-20, 2007)

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- 17) Increasing retirees' pension payments (March 19-20, 2007)
- 18) Education as a tough profession (February 5-6, 2007)
- 19) Elderly citizens (February 5-6, 2007)
- 20) Maintaining the oil wealth and using it well (April 2-3, 2007)
- 21) Establishing an underground subway company (April 26-27)

End text.

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